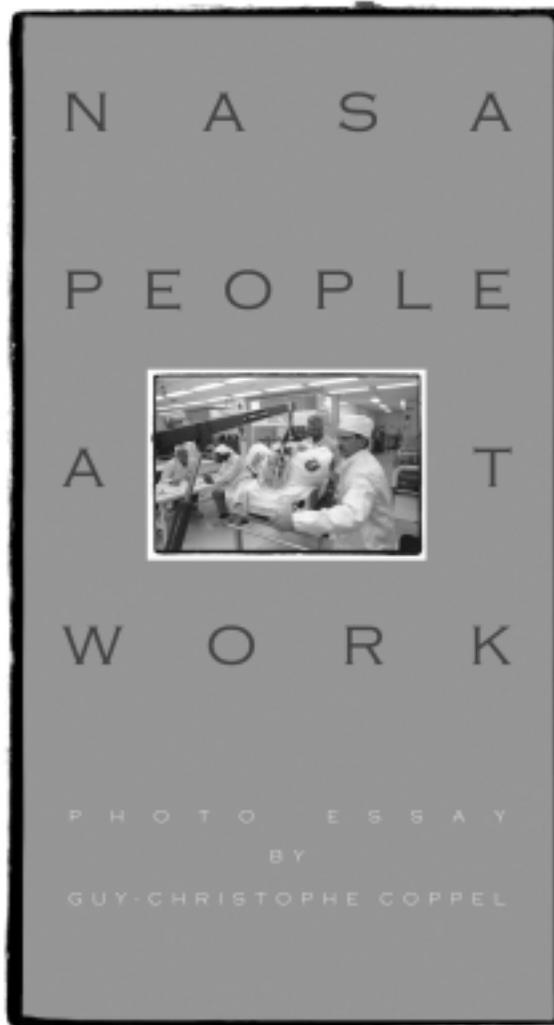


The
NASA PEOPLE AT WORK
Project

The Luckiest Man in the World

By
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Artist statement

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Photographer and Communication Consultant

I have been at NASA for 3 years now, sharing in the life of some of the very NASA people who made me dream as a child, creating a long-term photo-essay in the spirit of what photographer Eugene Smith would have done. At least I hope so.

Since I have been granted access to the Johnson Space Center under a 5-year, unique Space Act Agreement, I feel I am the luckiest man in the world. My story with NASA is a fairytale, a real one - one that is hard for even me to believe.

When I was 10 years old, watching 2 bulky white spacesuits moving clumsily and for the first time on the surface of the Moon, I was wondering who these people were.

Not Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin, of course, but the NASA people - the hundreds of thousands who made it possible for these 2 men to walk on another celestial body.

Before that, I missed nothing of the incredible images of the Gemini Program and I have a crisp, clear memory of Ed White making his first spacewalk. I was wondering who made this possible, who these incredible people were behind these achievements I was so hungry for.

My father was working for Kodak; and we had some information the general public in Europe did not have through the media - fact sheets, amazing pictures and special memorabilia - since Kodak was a NASA partner in those days.

NASA was a magic word, describing, in short, a few concepts that were all applicable to people. For me and many others, these 4 letters were synonymous with “the best of the best” for whom “nothing was impossible” - despite a tragic accident (Apollo 1). Down the road, this organization’s motto could have been “We’ll do it, no matter what,” which later would be formulated through a more restrictive form, I think, with the famous “failure is not an option.”

These people I did not know, and I had never seen, that I did not speak the language and who were living on the other side of the ocean, were simply, in my view, the most important people of all.

They opened for me and for millions of others, I guess, a window of “operational” optimism, of discovery made real, of technical and scientific achievements in a very troubled world at that time; and they let in the fresh air of a dream come true.

But most of all, they had for me a unique, maybe an unconscious, universal, humanistic message. They were carrying the daring human spirit of discovery beyond the known limits and were answering the common need for endeavor.

For a kid raised in the land of Lancelot and Merlin, these shiny knights and their armies of engineers and technicians were just taking on the forgotten Quest; and their Excalibur was a mighty rocket by the name of Saturn.

As I learned very early with the Round Table Knights’ myth, the Grail makes no sense without the Quest. The journey is everything. With the space program, the spirit of the Quest was alive again. These people were on the path. I could feel their trail; I was willing to ride behind them.

I remember enthusiastic debates at school about it. I knew nothing or very little about the Cold War extension in space. Yuri Gagarin died tragically the year before Apollo 11; and, for me, my vision of the Russian space efforts died with him. The excitement was now coming from NASA.

They were the people I wanted to believe in, because they were answering an overwhelming need I could not even formulate precisely, but a need that was just there, demanding.

I was trying to imagine: What did these people look like, how did they work, what were their methods...The images coming from America were mostly about the Vietnam war and the violence of the Civil Rights movement repression; but the excitement for me was made by these guys in Houston and at the Cape. They were operating live, before the whole world’s eyes.

The “fresh air of the dream come true” had definitely a space taste and an American accent. I had not yet had a Coca-Cola, I had not yet had a hamburger, but I knew something about NASA.

NASA and what it was doing were very inclusive of all of us, universal.

It never occurred to me that it could have been done only for the American people. I never had any doubt that what was happening was for us all as human beings, with no special distinction in terms of politics or nationalities.

The few answers my father was able to give me about the NASA people just triggered more questions, more interest in this “special breed” of people, as well as a deep admiration and respect for them.

All I could see of them were a few images of men in short-sleeved white shirts and black ties - a combination very unusual in Europe at that time - with real cool headsets looking alternatively very busy, focused, and quietly worried, getting really excited from time to time, and so enthusiastically joyful in Mission Control when the splashdown happened.

Except for watching the television journalists who specialized in space manipulate rocket models I would have died for, we didn’t have much in the media at that time beside the pictures in the illustrated magazines. I read them all again and again, including a visionary article that I still have of Charles Lindbergh talking about the future of human space exploration.

I knew it was just the surface of the reality, and was really wondering how it could be possible to make so many people work together and achieve such a tremendous effort.

This feeling would be emphasized by the Apollo 13 rescue, which helped me understand very clearly - luminously, I would say - that nothing like space could bring the whole world together that much and that quickly. Nothing.

On Apollo 13, three Earth children were lost somewhere between the Moon and Earth, farther away than anyone ever got in trouble before; and I felt these 3 guys did more to unify the people on Earth than any treaty, conference or organization. Ever.

I was barely 12 years old. I used to put the precious square-shaped Saturn V rocket I had patiently and carefully made out of all my Lego bricks under my bed every night to keep it out of harm's way.

You have no idea what a sister can do to the space program.

But I was still dreaming about the people who built it and operated it. The NASA people.

One day I heard, stunned, that the next launch, Apollo 17, would be the last launch. I think I kicked the walls for a whole week, overwhelmed by incomprehension and feeling really, deeply betrayed. The spirit of the Quest had been lost once again. I never played again with the now-useless bricks of Lego that once were part of my Saturn V.

My rocket was broken; and my heart was broken, too, as was Excalibur in the myth.

Skylab and then Apollo-Soyuz gave me some consolation, but nothing could compare with the lunar missions.

I could not know at the time that I would one day have the honor to have one of my pictures (The Sleeping Duty) presented to the 2 men who were the last to walk on the Moon, Gene Cernan and Harrison Schmitt, by the NASA Alumni for the 30th anniversary of their mission, or that I would be introduced to them.

For me, we were just beginning something incredibly exciting when, as I would learn a little later, obviously this had been just the end of a political game for others.

Childhood and innocence can sometimes end bitterly.

When I was 20 years old, I was discovering the power of images, people's own images, and was making my first serious exhibits. I read about an American photographer who had just died and who was considered the father of the "photo-essay." He had done exactly what I was willing to do, besides studying History and Geography in University and teaching Yoga for a living.

His battle to be respected as an author was the battle of many of us. Being the third generation of photographers in my family did not help me a lot in this respect. I was willing to say something, not just to take pictures that somebody else would feel free to crop, caption or ignore and use as if they had been some kind of expandable, cheap, raw material.

Photography was a true language, I thought. Pictures on a chosen subject should be considered a statement and respected as such. Personal captions would give the final touch to what is a photo-essay.

This photographer, this man, is considered today one of the world-famous photographers. He is recognized as a humanist and, probably, as a sort of activist in his own way.

Uncompromising, honest to the extreme, demanding, passionate, in love with humankind and this planet, he was W. Eugene Smith, a native of Wichita, Kansas.

Even if many do not recognize his name, all know his pictures - of Pittsburg workers, of the Pacific War, of Albert Schweitzer - his photo-essays - the Spanish Village, the Country Doctor, among others published in LIFE magazine - and certainly his pictures of the Minamata people, a Japanese village poisoned by mercury in the '70s that will be his last and probably greatest body of work with the monumental "Pittsburg photo-essay."

Inspired, lifted by the spirit of Smith's approach, I made a list of the subjects I would like to work on with, I believed, the same love, determination and uncompromising spirit that Eugene Smith showed us it was possible to have. I wrote 2 full pages of them. They were all about people.

Although I thought a lot about it, I did not put on the paper 2 of the subjects, just because I thought it was too much of a dream, much too unrealistic, but certainly some of the most exciting.

One was about trying to go back on the trail of photographer Edward Curtis, a century after he captured the life of the Native American and meet again with these people today. The other was a child's dream with a bittersweet taste; it was about the NASA people and their work.

I made a few of these photo-essays and some exhibitions. I learned a lot about people and about myself, on the way.

After a long silence, NASA was reaching for the sky again with a wonderful bird. Columbia flew for the first time a few weeks after my first son was born. It was April 12, 1981 - exactly 20 years before, to the day, that the first human being was discovering our planet from orbit and was telling the whole world how beautiful it was. Today we celebrate every April 12, worldwide, as Yuri's day, in memory of Mr. Gagarin's first step out of our cradle.

Stubbornly Yuri Gagarin's compatriots built space station after space station and eventually put together Mir, which was destined to become the first training base of the International Space Station through the amazing Shuttle-Mir Program.

Then the first 2 modules of the long-awaited International Space Station were in orbit... Hope of a new cooperating world was rising. Again space was bringing people together after being the field of a race. Former enemies, this time, were in the business to win the peace together.

When I was 40 years old, I was lucky enough to meet, by "pure chance," with a NASA official on vacation in Brittany, where I come from. When he asked me how much time I was willing to spend talking to him, I said that 20 minutes would be really great.

I was really excited to be able to tell him how important the space program was to me and I asked him questions about NASA, the people, the way they work together... I had no precise idea of who this person was. I knew that he was involved in the Apollo 13 rescue, and that he was a NASA senior manager at the Johnson Space Center. No more.

We talked. I talked, with passion and enthusiasm. He gracefully answered many questions, but he mostly listened with the patience of a wise, sitting bear observing you walking - amused, interested, careful though on his own territory - for nearly 2 hours, and I felt he realized I knew something about the space program. Enough to raise some true interest on his part.

I told him about my Lego Saturn V, the pictures my father gave me from the Gemini and Apollo Programs, the rescue of Apollo 13, the Space Station, Mars, the Moon... And I finally told him about my work as a communication consultant, a photographer, a "photo-essayist." I showed him some of my pictures.

I was so sure that many American photographers had already done the job of covering the behind-the-scenes life of NASA, the people of NASA, that I did not think it was even appropriate to mention my desire to do something in this respect. I did not want to spoil such an incredible conversation by making a stupid request for which I could have expected, at best, a polite "Thank you, but this have been done so many times, by so many people, you know..."

So I did not say anything... Until, against my will, the words came out of my mouth by themselves. The NASA PEOPLE AT WORK project that I did not put on paper 20 years before just made its way through.

I did not know that this man, who had finally said 3 sentences in a row - expressing his interest, giving me his phone number and asking me to, first of all, come for a launch in Florida - was one of the most influential persons at NASA. Somebody with both a iron-cast vision about the space program and the will to carry his vision through.

He was, at that time, Director of the Johnson Space Center with over 40 years at NASA under his belt. This NASA person was no body else than Mr. George Abbey.

I felt both relieved and stupid to have asked the question against my will.

It is sometimes useful to be stupid...

A trip to the Cape and to Houston followed. I had my first interview with the men who are, to this day, the people sponsoring the NASA PEOPLE AT WORK project and who gave this crazy idea a chance to become a reality.

Among a few others - Greg Hayes and Mike Stewart, respectively Director and Branch Chief of the Human Resources and Education Office at the Johnson Space Center in Houston - took a chance, bet on me and gave me a lifetime opportunity.

With a lot of care, creativity and daring spirit, they allowed a 20-year-old idea to makes its way to reality. When you think about it, that is often the length of time it takes at NASA for a program to become a reality, too.

What we did not know at the time was that this idea would be nearly instantly "adopted" by the NASA people I came for, and that it would become in less than a few months time the answer to a deep need of these people to be seen and recognized for what they are: the beating heart and the human face of NASA.

NASA PEOPLE AT WORK, which started as a personal project, was allowed to exist thanks to a mix of chance, determination and vision from real risk takers at NASA. It became a one-of-a-kind photo-essay deeply connected with what NASA is, through images of its people at work. It also has the powerful potential of being a simple, straightforward communication and educational tool, warmly supported by the very people who are its subject.

Being “adopted” in this way by the NASA people in the field, and seeing this project used by NASA for the new potential it was offering, was an incredible reward. The NASA PEOPLE AT WORK exhibit went as far as Moscow and Paris, and it was warmly welcomed by the demanding audience of the World Space Congress in Houston.

Because it is very new and open, NASA PEOPLE AT WORK can easily fall into a narrow “artistic” category that is not its goal. Its communication and educational potentials have yet to be fully understood by those who can use them, and have not been exploited as much as they should be thus far.

Showing that NASA was made of people, that these people were working for other people with a mission, and showing them “at work” was probably making them the best and most efficient ambassadors to the outside world NASA could dream of. This is the simple formula of the work this project is proposing to do.

It revealed itself as an extremely powerful force - internally as well as externally - precisely because it allowed a direct, emotional, inspirational connection from people to people. Inspiring more than describing, the sleek language offered by black-and-white pictures and their captions gives this work a human tone and translates, as much as possible, the spirit of space discovery and the efforts, commitment and dedication necessary to achieve this goal.

NASA PEOPLE AT WORK is not a catalog of positions, facilities, activities or centers at NASA; it is a mosaic of precious and symbolic moments in the collective life of a living and inspiring organization whose face is definitely made of human gestures rather than pieces of amazing, shiny hardware.

It tries to capture the spirit of the people involved with one of the most daring adventures of humankind: Reaching into outer space, because it is all things considered, the shortest way to conquer our collective and individual inner space, among many other benefits.

NASA PEOPLE AT WORK is about the spirit of the Quest, for the NASA people ARE the people of the Quest.

Being able to share the everyday life of this very special community of individuals is truly a privilege. I feel very fortunate to have found a very large and friendly support group in the NASA people for whom I came, and I have received the warmest help from all of them and at all levels.

It is a true honor to be accepted and considered part of the NASA family, sharing in their incredible successes as well as in the difficult moments that accompany all great endeavors, with the same deep respect that probably no journalist would ever be able to understand.

But who cares about understanding since most of the news business is now show business?

The same people who ignored the space program for decades are usually the first to judge, blame, advise, condemn, trash, cut... because they “knew better” than those in connection with the inside reality. These people usually forget that the best advocates can also be the toughest judges, precisely because they care.

Being “embedded” with the NASA people, at work, for the past 3 years has given me a slightly different perspective to that of any best-informed journalist and has definitely provided me with some precious knowledge about things there such as the fragility associated with the greatness of people and organization; the debatable management - of lack of it - of a resource like NASA by politicians; the difficult art of practicing efficient internal and external communication in any large organization, especially in government; the burden for an organization of that kind of always having to fight in order to justify its own existence... among other things.

It provide also with a unique understanding of what makes people hang in there despite a lot of difficulties and frustrations; and it gives a precise idea about what NASA has in common with any other large, complex human organization in terms of management challenges, communication and cultural issues.

Overall, living inside NASA and realizing what is seen from outside, gives a powerful and frustrating sense of missed opportunities, of the waste of people, and of total misunderstanding - by a large portion of those who have no excuse to ignore it, and no right to despise it - concerning why and how the space program is so critical in so many ways.

It makes you wish that every organization dealing with much less complex issues would have the same record of successes, especially within government. This does not mean there is no room for improvement. Precisely, these successes are very demanding and calling for the highest standards.

The smallest excess of confidence, lack of humility, any human or technical failure are paid at the highest rate. There is no question that such an organization has no choice but to be, at any given time and in any field activity or functioning, the absolute example of the most demanding of all. But this permanent and tremendous effort is impossible on the long run without any strong reaffirmed support as well as a clear vision of our goals and the means to go with.

Three years at NASA teaches you a lot about people. It teaches you a lot about yourself, too.

I realized quickly that I was not “taking” the pictures you see in this work. The NASA people, allowing me to share their life and work, actually “give” me these pictures. I just make myself available for them.

I wish these images would help to make the people of this country understand how lucky they are to have such an incredible human asset, made up of amazing people working in what is a unique organization on this planet.

To my own surprise, I discovered that The American people, generally speaking know very little about the NASA people and the Space Program while taking many things for granted. They owe them a lot - starting with fairness.

I wish also NASA PEOPLE AT WORK will help people to understand that without their support - which starts with keeping themselves informed of what the space program is doing, and doing for them - the commitment, the dedication and, sometimes, the sacrifice of NASA people is sadly meaningless.

The people of NASA make this organization a living organism.

Fragile, wonderful, fallible, incredibly resourceful, resilient, passionate... In other words, human. In some respect, NASA it is like a muscle.

Use it improperly, and you'll hurt yourself. Don't use it, and you lose it altogether.

NASA is a true human, living treasure. It is made of flesh and blood, hearts and souls, knowledge and experience, aspirations and inspiration, and 45 years of dedicated work to better know and understand the world in which we are living.

It is, I believe, able to provide the best humans can imagine, do and hope. It is not just another government agency or just a line on a budget that is so convenient to cut. NASA is made OF people working FOR people.

It is, in many respects, the mirror of our ability to project ourselves.

It carries, at the highest point, the spirit of challenge, discovery and humanism that was and still is the promise of this country as I understand it, and the risks that go with it. It symbolizes the Quest that is the engine of progress on all levels.

I feel that these people are the silent heroes of our future. Their teamwork is probably our modern version of Lewis and Clark.

Saying that and looking to the NASA people around me, a question comes to mind.

What would Lewis and Clark have done without President Jefferson's vision and the support of Congress to go and discover the new frontier of their time?

May the NASA people, at work in these images, inspire you and all who make decisions regarding the space program, as they inspired me.

And all together, let's be the luckiest people in the world, because we treasure the people we are lucky to have.

Guy-Christophe Coppel,

NASA Johnson Space Center

Houston, Texas, USA, Earth...

September 29, 2003

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